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ABSTRACT

Problems facing foreign students in American colleges and universities are examined. With the number of foreign students studying in the United States increasing each year (over 203,000 in 1976-77), services for foreign students need to be expanded with more emphasis on improving orientation programs. Preadmission screening and counseling are urged to familiarize potential students with the American educational system, standards of academic performance, and social behavior. Obstacles cited include the language problem, degree requirements, course structure; course content, and academic standards. The importance of academic advising to alleviate confusion over course options and program organization is discussed. Also considered are economic problems encountered by foreign students who come with limited funds and have unrealistic ideas about the availability of financial aid or other sources of income and did not anticipate inflation, changed or extended their coursework or overextended themselves buying American consumer goods. Problems of cultural assimilation are noted. Several possible solutions to ease the transition for foreign students are suggested: (1) standardized admissions information centrally organized and easily available; (2) more thorough orientation programs; (3) special training for teachers who instruct foreign students; (4) programs to prepare foreign students for reentry to their home countries; (5) maintenance of contact with foreign alumni. (BH)

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FOREIGN STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES: IS THE WELCOME MAT OUT?

By Margot Sanders Eddy

The United States ranks as the world's major host country for undergraduate and graduate students from other countries, even though American colleges and universities are enrolling a decreasing proportion of the world's total population of students in international exchange (Julian 1978, p. 3). In the past twenty years, the number of foreign students in this country has increased sixfold, and continues to rise. In 1976-77 American institutions received over 203,000 foreign students, 1.8 per cent of the total student population. About one-third are currently enrolled in private colleges, as compared with one-fourth of American students, and most foreign students are in institutions with enrollments of over 5,000. Also, a large proportion are enrolling in two-year colleges (Julian 1978, pp. 3-6).

But there are problems. Services for foreign students are inadequate, especially in the area of orientation. Foreign students are often perplexed by admissions procedures, personal counseling, financial aid, and academic advising, among other things. This paper treats these problems in the order in which students confront them when they arrive at their institution, and includes a discussion of the difficulty in choosing an institution without benefit of first-hand experience.

Foreign Student Dilemmas

The foreign student experience actually begins before arrival at a college or university, since a choice must be made of the type and place of education. This requires the kind of background knowledge that even American students find difficult to obtain. Add to this the distance, language and cultural factors and you have all the ingredients for misunderstanding.

Less than half of the foreign students who arrive here have been screened for evidence that they will make a satisfactory academic and personal adjustment (National Association for Foreign Student Affairs (NAFSA) 1974, p. 9). The problem lies in lack of specific goals in the admission process. Many researchers have stressed the need for a preadmission counseling and selection process that facilitates the fulfillment of the student's own objectives and his potential for contributing to the welfare of his own country (NAFSA 1974; Benson and Kovach 1974; McCrone 1975).

After the student chooses a college or university and is accepted, a collection of potentially threatening circumstances begins to surface, including language differences, the American educational system, standards of academic and social behavior, an alien economy and unforseen expenses, and legal barriers to assimilation. A student who is not familiar with his new environment may not get help in dealing with problems, since student personnel services are oriented to American students' needs and not to those of foreign students (Altacher 1976). Under these conditions the obstacles to getting an education may become enormous.

Language Barriers—The first barrier for the foreign student to encounter is language. By far, the majority of foreign students in the United States come from countries where English is not the first language. Some of those students have had English instruction throughout their formal education, and some have come from families where English is commonly spoken. Yet, there are a large number of students who find it difficult to function satisfactorily in an academic context, even though they are able to pass a standardized proficiency examination. NAFSA (1974, p. 13) cites proficiency in spoken and written English as the greatest contributing factor to the academic success of the foreign student. This is especially significant, since the least proficient frequently are from the developing countries that urgently need the technical and scientific competence brought back by their student emissaries. The language problem recently has been highlighted by an action of the Iranian government, whose students now comprise the largest foreign nationality on American campuses. It has dropped the requirement that Iranians who want to study abroad have to pass a foreign language proficiency examination before leaving the country. For the U.S. this means many more Iranian students who are underprepared in English will be applying to American colleges and universities. This underscores the need for teaching and screening devices to deal with this eventuality.

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Academic Advisement—Ironically, our educational system also may become an obstacle to education. Degree requirements, course structure, course content, and academic standards may be quite different from those in the foreign student's home country. The student may be confused by his course options and program organization. So, while academic advisement is not always crucial to a native student's academic success, it usually is to the foreign student's. For these reasons, NAFSA (1974, p. 16) suggests that the visitor's program and progress be carefully supervised throughout his studies. For example, in a study of Arab students in the state of Oregon, poor academic advising was given as the second major reason for failure to graduate on schedule. Poor academic performance and changing majors, both the possible results of inadequate advising, were two other reasons for delaying graduation (Hagey and Hagey 1974, p. 44).

Economic Problems—Economic problems also loom large among the matters of greatest concern to foreign students. A NAFSA study (Stecklein and Liu 1974, p. 3) found that family and personal savings account for the largest portion of foreign students' total resources (about 48 percent); employment—mostly among graduate students—and institutional aid are the next largest sources of support, followed by aid from private organizations, home government, and U.S. government sources.

But the overall picture is more complex. Students who come to this country with limited resources may incur financial difficulties because they estimated their expenses with inadequate information provided in college catalogs, had unrealistic ideas about the availability of financial aid or other sources of income, did not anticipate inflation, changed or extended their coursework, or overextended themselves buying American consumer goods.

Students may also have changes in values. A student may arrive here believing that dependence on family and home government is acceptable but then come to view American students as independent and see the emphasis placed on self-help, such as employment. However, the foreign student may find that self-help is nearly impossible. Since 1971, a shift in regulations and a reinterpretation of U.S. laws have severely restricted foreign students' ability to obtain employment (Hendricks and Skinner 1975, p. 50). Although some students do obtain work permits, they are generally for noncampus jobs (Stecklein and Liu 1974, p. 2), and competition with native students for those jobs may be stiff.

In addition, the students' supporters at home may not understand the need for money in the "resourceful" United States. Stecklein and Liu (1974, p. 60) found that support from home sources often actually decreases after the first year. The result of these circumstances is that most foreign students must find additional financial support after being here only a year, and such help is difficult for a foreigner to obtain.

Cultural Assimilation—Understanding American behavior and adjusting to it may be a difficult task for foreign students. Ryu (1976, p. 1) notes that socialization in a new culture is not a continuation of the developmental process in the home country. Many factors come into play. First, the student's legal status as an alien may imply to his native peers that he is transient in American society and brand him from the outset as an outsider (Hendricks and Skinner 1975, p. 15). Also, as a foreigner, the student may not have a clear idea of what is expected of him, how much Americans assume he understands, or how many questions he should ask (Hendricks and Skinner 1975, p. 12). Cultural differences in friendship-building, dating etiquette, or even aggressiveness may be confusing and possibly considered taboo as topics for discussion with any but very close friends. Also, homesickness and climate may make adjustment difficult. Americans' activities and interests may seem quite strange, and prejudices, impatience, and religious and political attitudes on the part of both foreign and native students may interfere with socialization (Altscher 1976; Middleton 1978, p. 10). The Hendricks and Skinner study (1975, p. 37) found that few foreign students consider Americans among their closest friends. Most foreign students are closest to their fellow countrymen, and then to other foreign students. McCrone (1975, pp. 13-14) suggests that some students undergo a self-imposed detachment from American culture, thus creating a strong cliquish bond with fellow countrymen. Faculty who are critical of the United States and the college or university's own ivory-tower detachment from the community may also serve to distort the student's view of America. Moreover, relationships with a host family are likely to be primarily social, without needed emotional ties. Compounding this ensemble of problems is the possibility that seeking personal counseling may not be culturally acceptable to the foreigner.

Reentry—for those students who do return to their home countries after completion of study, the reentry process may be difficult. After four or more years in the United States, reentry may be very much like the entry experience, in the sense that it requires reacculturation. Cultural, social, religious, economic, linguistic, political, educational, and professional adjustments may have to be made. Some students will be eager to return home; others may have mixed feelings; and still others may have come to feel considerable alienation from their own cultures. Marsh (1975, p. 5) discusses the "role shock" that a foreign student may experience when he is not automatically seen as a change agent on return to his home country. He has probably come to consider himself well-educated and sophisticated, and may find that his fellow countrymen do not perceive him the same way. Kalra (1974, p. 46) points out that there is serious underemployment for many of these scholars, especially in developing countries where government support does not match the scholars' talents. It is likely, too, that many graduates will be unable to continue their professional development either at home or by

making occasional visits to the United States. In the long run this situation tends to work against both the individual and one of the major objectives of international educational exchange: to set in motion and perpetuate the development of nations by the education of their native inhabitants.

Institutional Perspectives

Colleges and universities usually view foreign students as a source of diversity, enlightenment, and revenue. However, as it has already been discussed, they also bring with them special needs. It is the responsibility of the institution to deal with these needs, starting when the students make initial inquiries.

It is difficult for institutions to know how much orientation a foreign student needs, since the sophistication of the students may vary greatly. Accurate evaluation of entering students' academic needs is also hampered by difficulty in obtaining curricular and equivalency information about the applicant and his academic preparation. In recent years the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers and the International Council for Educational Development have tried to bridge the gap with their respective series on educational systems around the world, but information exchange is still a great problem.

McCrone (1975) discusses another complication: the temptation for some institutions to recruit foreign applicants purely for financial reasons. This risks both the success of the students and the quality of the programs into which they are channeled. Student and program may be mismatched, with the result that the student is unfulfilled or performs poorly and the program gets a poor reputation that is undeserved.

Once the institution accepts foreign applicants, special program needs arise. For example, testing and placement in English language and other academic subjects must be done and changes in program content may have to be made to accommodate differences in the student's academic training. During this process and throughout the student's entire program there is a need for accurate and sensitive advising. Personal and career counseling are especially important in foreign student programs, and trained staff are needed to handle these areas of need.

Possible Solutions

There is considerable concern about the problems encountered by foreign students in this country, and by the colleges and universities serving them, but there is also considerable agreement about approaches to addressing these concerns. Most attention is focused on admissions, orientation, counseling, and reentry to the home country, with some consideration being given to procedures within the classroom.

- Applications and admissions should be better organized. Ideally, some manner of standardized or centralized admissions information would be useful. McCrone (1975, p. 32) recommends that a national admissions screening board for foreign students be established to systematize the admissions process. He also suggests that any institution accepting foreign students admit a minimum of twenty as a way to promote equality of foreign and native students on campus and to make it cost-effective to provide appropriate additional services. In a study done for the state of Florida, Komaniecka (1977, p. 30) suggests centralized processing within the state system. NAFSA (1974, pp. 12-13, p. 19) recommends substantial improvements within the existing institutional admissions process, including referral of inappropriate applications to other institutions, use of foreign student alumni as admissions aides, and the involvement of several officers in processing each application: one from the admissions office, one the foreign student advisor, and one a faculty member in the major department. NAFSA emphasizes placing the best interests of the individual student first during the entire admissions process.
- More thorough orientation programs are needed. Ideas for orientation programs are varied, and range from preentry orientation centers scattered throughout the state (Komaniecka 1975, p. 31) to traditional campus orientation, cultural orientation, reentry programs, and all-purpose transition orientation (McMillen 1976, p. 4). Most deal with traditional programs developed for Americans, modified to meet foreign student needs (NAFSA 1974, pp. 14-15; Perkins 1977, p. 387; McCrone 1975, p.33); Altscher 1976, pp. 3-10). McCrone favors bi-national orientation teams in the home country. He also believes that as an extension of their cultural and educational experience undergraduate foreign students should be required to attend two different kinds of institutions (e.g., large and small, public and private) in order to qualify for a bachelor's degree. Most authors direct their attention to the inclusion of special elements in existing programs: financial matters, housing information, more elaborate tours, American life and customs, and social and political institutions.

The orientation function is necessarily closely linked to counseling since the orientation may be accomplished either in groups or by individual contact and can be understood as an extension of the counseling function. On most campuses the foreign student advisor, generally a faculty member, serves also as counselor, mentor, and facilitator, and may act as a catalyst for the student in making decisions, undertaking changes, and establishing social contacts. This is a substantial job to perform and requires special skills. Komaniecka (1977, p. 31) proposes that a line position for a foreign student advisor be available to each institution in a state system in addition to a designated faculty advisor. McCrone (1975, p. 27) further recommends international coordination, training, and advisement of foreign student advisors, as well as bi-national advising on U.S. campuses.

- Foreign students would benefit from special teacher training. Teacher training has not received a great deal of attention in the literature on foreign students except as it relates to orientation. Cable (1974) provides more insights on treating foreign students fairly in the classroom. What may seem small items for the teacher to remember or incorporate in his teaching may have great significance to the student. Such items include putting outlines on the blackboard (an aid in learning

both the subject matter and the language), monitoring his own rate of speech, allowing the use of dictionaries in exams whenever possible, and alotting a slightly longer exam period. Cable believes learning to pronounce foreign names properly is a skill to be cultivated, and encourages faculty to meet students outside of class in more informal situations. Both can be extremely helpful to all concerned. In addition, the teacher and the foreign student advisor can be valuable resources for each other, and should consult regularly to monitor students' progress.

- Programs are needed to prepare foreign students for reentry to their home countries. Reentry is the transition process during which the foreign student returns to his home country. It begins with his anticipation of and preparation for return, and continues through his reacculturation at home. Marsh (1975, pp. 6-15) suggests that reentry orientation might begin as early as admission to the institution, and provides a thorough discussion of the goals and issues to be considered. She treats reentry orientation as "preparation for potentially stressful events," and finds evidence that such preparation is valuable to students. NAFSA reiterates the importance of pre-return programs as part of an institution's overall foreign student program (1974, p. 15).
- Maintaining contact with alumni is important. Marsh (1975), NAFSA (1974), and McCrone (1975, p. 34) all support the continuing involvement of foreign student alumni with the institution, especially in the areas of continuing professional education and admissions. Marsh encourages professional associations to provide seminars for foreign students before their return home in hopes of setting in motion lifelong professional development. McCrone suggests that U.S. sources pay for regular return trips to the United States, and encourages continuing membership in professional organizations. An alumni contact network could play a part in such developmental activities. That same network could also bring needed insight and assistance to the foreign student admissions process, thus coming full circle on the foreign student experience (NAFSA 1974, p. 19).

Conclusions

The foreign student in the United States has an experience that is very different from that of his American counterpart. Visiting students differ greatly as individuals but have common experiences and problems that colleges and universities enrolling them must deal with. The literature on foreign students clearly suggests that we have a double standard: foreigners coming to our country to study must do so on our terms—in our language, from our point of view, at our prices—and yet we do not make available to them resources equal to those available to American students. Some services are offered, but at our own convenience and often not in direct relation to students' real needs. Our own students receive financial aid and developmental programs, but foreign students are pressured to be self-sufficient adults. The problems are compounded when they are accepted into academic programs without adequate assistance to ensure that the appropriate match is being made.

Foreign students bring a needed diversity to American campuses and offer fresh perspectives to the academic community. In addition, they represent significant revenue for institutions and local communities, and take little of our financial aid resources in return.

In a time of financial exigency, it may be difficult for institutions to offer elaborate programs and services to small groups of students. However, they must be conscious of their accountability to these students. When a college or university responds to a preadmissions inquiry from a foreign students, it is responsible for providing him with adequate information. Further, when it admits him it makes a commitment to his education, and has the much more formidable responsibility—and potential rewards—of giving him the best it has to offer, and no less than it offers to its native students.

The United States has a commitment to international educational exchange, and higher education is fundamental to that effort. But during the late 1960's the federal government's share of the funding for international exchange (that is, for sponsored programs) dropped 10 percent while both nongovernment sponsors and foreign governments increased their shares. Komaniecka (1977, p. 17) feels that this reduction of federal support dims the outlook for funding international students, "transforming opportunity into elitism." This may be especially true since it costs a college or university more to educate a foreign student than a native student because of the need for special advisory staff and often special language and orientation programs. Such a development is unfortunate since there is much to be gained from educational exchange.

Fourteen years ago most foreign students came from Canada, but now both Iran and Nigeria have more than tripled their 1965 contingents; by 1977 Iran was number one and Nigeria number four in foreign students in this country. China is just beginning to send students and scholars here. Developing nations need the technical and scientific training American institutions can provide. What foreign students see in this country may encourage them to change technical, scientific and educational approaches in their own countries. In sociopolitical terms, the United States can provide leadership development that has long-range benefits in international affairs by setting up enlightened approaches to helping foreign students in our country. Colleges and universities should be prepared to educate students who may one day be national or world leaders. Considering these factors, the United States has the responsibility to provide foreign visitors with the best experience and the best education possible. America has much to offer and much to gain by doing so.

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